

Feeding and Breeding Meat Pens: at Desert Sage Rabbitry

This is intended solely as an example for people who may be new to raising meat pens. Please investigate the feeds and supplements available in your area. Talk to other rabbit breeders. I also recommend reading the book: Official Guide to Raising Better Rabbits & Cavies from the American Rabbit Breeder's Association. It will help you understand feeding and supplements. **Please read all sections for the most tips.**

1. Never ever let your meat pen entries (or any rabbit) **run out of clean drinking water.** I hang water bottles over my water dishes. My rabbits always drink their dishes dry before resorting to the bottle. And if the bottle drips it goes right into the dish instead of on the ground. I change/refill the water morning and evening. Scrub the algae out of the water bottle once or twice a week at least. If you can't find a bottle brush that reaches all the way to the bottom: Put that red ant pile to good use! At night when the ants are asleep use some of their gravel and water and shake it in your water bottle. Cover the opening with your hand (not the lid) so you don't damage the tube and make it drip constantly.

2. Never let them run out of 18% protein rabbit food or high quality alfalfa hay. My rabbits do better on Pen Pals and Purina than they do on the Ranchway or Nutrena available in my area. Hay may be a grass mix, try to avoid weeds that can be toxic. Bright green and sweet smelling with no grey or black mold, no dust, no musty smell. It only takes one bale of certified weed free hay to feed a doe and litter for up to 12 weeks, well worth it in my opinion. My hay costs me \$10 a bale.

3. Keep them as cool as possible during the summer. Hot rabbits eat less and grow less. Use fans, swamp coolers or air conditioners in a barn, close to the rabbits but not blowing on them. You can hang white or light colored wet towels or blankets close to and on top of an outside hutch for shade and coolness. Make sure there is a one foot gap along the sides to let air escape the hutch. So if the towels dry out when your aren't there you won't trap heat in the hutch and kill your rabbits! Putting frozen bottles of water in the cage every day gives them ice to lie next to, but it can create smut on Californian colored rabbits. Lightly misting their ears with a water spray bottle can also help.

4. Give them the largest cage possible for exercise to build muscle. But make sure you can still catch them. Do not chase or "encourage" your rabbits to move around, they will do this by themselves at night. Too much exercise will result in thin or underweight bunnies instead of meaty bunnies.

5. Keep your chosen trio (3) or 4 with their mother if she will allow it. Some mothers will nurse their kits until they are 3 months old. Extra nutrition. Try to weigh them or evaluate them weekly. If you start seeing some size or growth difference leave the one or two smallest with mom. Put the two biggest in a separate cage.

6. If you don't own the mother raise your trio or 4 together in the same cage to reduce emotional stress.

Separate them when they are 10 weeks old, or when they go to the fair if possible. But many require that they share a cage together so raising them together can reduce the fighting each other risk. The fighting usually doesn't start until 12 weeks old but keep an eye out for tufts of fur in the cage or below it. If you find any separate them that day! That night they might do considerable damage to each other. Rabbits are most active at night.

7. I feed this supplement mix once a day, usually in the evening. Digesting food creates heat so I want them to start digesting it in the cool of the summer night. 1 tablespoon calf mana, 1 tablespoon of oats *, ¼ teaspoon of wheat germ oil and 1 tablespoon of sweet feed grain (oats, corn, barley, molasses with or without protein added). Corn or safflower oil for cooking can be used instead of wheat germ but it has fewer vitamins in it. Use a dish big enough so they can all eat at the same time or you will have a "hog" that grows too fast or a "runt" that is too small. * Oats can be whole (horse), mixed with molasses, cracked or the old fashioned quacker oatmeal (not instant or quick cooking) from the grocery store. I sell small quantities of **Supplement mix with oil** if you don't want to buy the 50 pound bags sold in feed stores. A meat pen only needs 3 quarts of supplement and 1 cup of oil for one month (or less).

8. If you can raise 4 rabbits it gives you an extra if one doesn't make the right weight range or develops a health issue so it can't go to the show or fair. If the fourth is good to go you can usually enter it in a breed class or the single fryer class.

9. Handle every other day. Pick up, turn over and pose each of your rabbits once; every other day. It will help them behave on the show table a lot, and impress the judge. Handling them every day can stress them into growing slower. I usually start this about 6 weeks old. I also hold and "inspect" young litters about twice a week starting at 2 weeks of age if the doe is comfortable with me.

10. Don't panic at the size of your 4 or 6 week old bunnies. They can double or more than double their size/weight between 6 and 10 weeks old! Mine usually more than double their size during this month.

11. Keep an eye on their growth. You can slow it down by removing the hay 1st, the supplements 2nd and reducing their rabbit pellets 3rd.

Breeding for meat pens

- 1. Check your calendar!** I check my calendar and my herd right after I have recovered from state fair. Will I have breeding age bucks and does ready when I need them? I need to breed them about April 25th for Fremont County's fair. Will I have some young and some experienced does/bucks to breed? Older rabbits may not conceive or make it thru the winter. First time bucks/does may not breed or know how to raise their 1st litter. A mix is your best bet.
- 2. Know your breeds/bloodlines.** Or ask their breeder. Californians and New Zealand whites have the quickest growth. And a Cal NZW cross can grow even faster! Look at the weights for your breeds in the ARBA Standard of Perfection: NZ and d'Argents reach the same adult size but d'Argents grow slower. Satin/NZ and Cal/NZ crosses grow faster than purebred satins. If one of your parents must be a Rex try to cross with a NZW or Cal, a Rex/Satin cross will grow slower and be less meaty. I have bloodlines that grow slower and faster, so I may breed some litters to be as old as allowed and others to be 2 weeks younger so they make the weight range without going over weight.
- 3. I supplement my nursing does** starting when the litter is 3 days old, if it is large. Some breeders will cull newborns so the doe only has 6 to nurse, I don't. I use #7 in Feeding Meat Pens. I double the dose when a large litter is 6 weeks old and still with mom. Small breed does or does with less than 6 kits get between $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{1}{4}$ dose of supplement. It is possible to kill a rabbit with too much supplement (especially vitamin A). I want my nursing does to loose just a little weight, so I know that I'm not overdosing the supplement.
- 4. Most of my herd eats 18% protein** rabbit pellets most of the time. I only use 16% on individuals that are getting to fat. In the summer heat rabbits eat less so the higher protein can help them. In the winter cold they need all the nutrition they can get. Most of my herd also gets a handful of good hay every other day.

1 month before the show/fair

- 1. I identify the individual rabbits I plan to show.** Tattoo them if they need it. If my rabbit is shedding/molting now it won't have prime/winning fur in a month. But if I brush it a little once a day to remove the loose hair, give it a handful of hay (the grassier the better as opposed to alfalfa) daily. It helps prevent hair balls and I don't start the supplement until it is completely done shedding. It may do well in the breed class in a month. It may not have great fur for an additional month so I don't enter that class.
- 2. I put a colored scrap of paper on their feeder so I remember to condition them.**
- 3. Condition them with the supplement mix.**
 - Adult Himalayans and Mini Rex get $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon per day.
 - Adult large breeds get 1 teaspoon per day.
 - Adult Flemish Giants 1 tablespoon per day (if I owned any).
 - Any rabbit less than 6 months old and not in a meat pen $\frac{1}{2}$ dose daily.Once my rabbit reaches its prime fur and flesh condition I cut the supplement to half a dose so it holds its condition as long as possible.
- 4. Handle them.** Pick up, turn over, and pose. Check teeth, toenails, vent/sex and pet their belly so they get used to it and you will have a happier judge.
 - Novice rabbits I try to get to once a day 2-3 times a week.
 - Experienced and calm rabbits once a week.
- 5. Car rides:** I like to set up my carriers with the bedding, water bottles, food dishes and plastic resting pads or hay so my rabbits get used to traveling. Inexperienced rabbits go for a quick day ride 2 weeks before the fair/show. Experienced and inexperienced rabbits then go for a quick ride about one week before the show. Make this a night ride if you will have to travel at night. Show your new rabbits that the headlights reflecting inside your vehicle won't eat them! I live $\frac{1}{2}$ hour out of town so these are my excuses for drive thru fast food dinners. That way I don't get out of the car and risk heat stroked rabbits. On summer days feel free to use your air conditioning! Keep the sun off your rabbits in the car. If it's a pick up bed or trailer, shade and wind protection is necessary! Wet blankets or towels over the carriers can create cool. Bring a 5 gallon bucket or can of water with you, your "traveling swamp cooler" will dry out quickly and heatstroke your rabbits if you don't pull over and get the fabric wet again. Another summer idea: bring a cooler full of ice cubes. Pour a layer of ice cubes on the fabric over your carriers. It will be much cooler than just water. When a rabbit is willing to eat and drink while the vehicle is moving it is used to traveling (not stressed or frightened).
- 6. Nutri Drench/Drops for Rabbits or Poultry:** I have been impressed with the results and they have the same guaranteed analysis. 2 days before the judging I keep 1 drop in the show rabbit's water dish so they get used to the taste. At the show I put 1 drop in their water bottles. I often keep it in their water if they have a long trip home.

Does: It can also be good for does that will kindle in a day or two and for 2 days after they kindle, to help them recover. If you put it in the drinking water and the doe doesn't like the taste she will dehydrate and not make any milk or possibly die. That is why you get her used to it 2 days before she kindles. If she isn't used to it and needs it because she is stressing put a drop in her mouth. Then she won't stop eating or drinking from the taste of her drinking water.

Please see the Beginning Bunnies page of my Desert Sage Rabbitry.com website for more tips and tricks.